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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000519

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/RSA, AF/FO
DEFENSE DEPARTMENT FOR OSD - DAS WHALEN

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR ASSESSMENT OF REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
ARMED FORCES (RSLAF) FOR ENTRY INTO ACOTA

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (U) Summary: U.S. Embassy Freetown requests Department and the Office of the Secretary of Defense to conduct a feasibility assessment of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF). The assessment concerns entry into the Africa Contingency Operations Technical Assistance (ACOTA) Program. Suggested timeframe for the assessment is NOV 2008 through JAN 2009. Suggested meetings include the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defense (MOD), the UK-led International Military Advisory Training Team (IMATT), and the RSLAF 5th Brigade in Bo. Post and other allies strongly support RSLAF inclusion in the ACOTA Program, and recognize that their membership would have long-term impact on regional security interests. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The RSLAF are prepared to provide one light infantry company to the ECOWAS Standby Force and three light infantry companies to the UN for peacekeeping deployments. The Minister of Defense and the Chief, Defense Staff (CDS) have expressed a willingness to volunteer for hard assignments wherever needed and flexibility in specializing in areas such as transportation or military police. To demonstrate its commitment to engaging in peacekeeping operations, the CDS and the deputy IMATT commander traveled to New York in JUL 2008 for talks with the UN Peacekeeping Division. As a result, Sierra Leone will strengthen its relationship with the Division by observing its operations. To date, the RSLAF have sent a Defense AttachQ to the UN for coordinating Sierra Leone's military peacekeeping contributions and have selected nine officers to serve as HQ staff officers or UN observers at missions in East Timor, Nepal, Somalia or Sudan.

¶3. (C) The RSLAF is a small professionalizing force with an expected strength of 8,500 troops by mid 2009, but has equipment needs, and lacks training and experience in company/battalion-size peacekeeping. Despite these challenges, it has greatly benefited since 2001 from outstanding British training, mentoring and tutelage in small unit tactics, company to brigade-size mission planning, training at the tactical, operational and strategic levels, and staff officer capacity building. This training has helped distinguish the RSLAF as a very capable force worthy of entry into ACOTA. The RSLAF currently has sustainable peacekeeping capability thanks to the UK's training and financing. IMATT and the U.S. Defense AttachQ believe that the RSLAF could be ready to field a battalion by late 2009/early 2010 provided they are given battalion-level training. Slow integration into UN peacekeeping missions will ensure further readiness.

¶4. (C) ACOTA membership supports U.S. strategic regional objectives. The U.S. Embassy, U.S. Defense Attache, and IMATT strongly support RSLAF entry into ACOTA also for the following reasons: a) the Sierra Leone government has supported U.S. positions and shown commitment to human rights and democratic principles through visible action on major

issues such as public and UN recognition of Kosovo independence and admonishment of the Zimbabwean government for election fraud; b) ACOTA membership will continue to upgrade the developing capabilities of the five companies already trained by IMATT; c) it meets USG strategic goals in the Mano River Union by creating a buffer between Guinea and Liberia, which are unstable at best, chaotic at worst; d) ACOTA membership provides cash flow into the military that would increase financial stability within the ranks, significantly reducing the threat of instability from within; e) membership would provide the MOD with the capability to purchase equipment and an expanded range of operational capabilities; and, f) ACOTA training would continue to contribute to the professionalism of the RSLAF, reducing the risks of human rights violations. It would continue to build the RSLAF's solid, dedicated force, while ameliorating the budgetary pressures that risk good order and discipline. ACOTA participation will ensure that the RSLAF will be part of the solution in any internal or sub-regional conflicts, rather than part of the problem. The RSLAF is also key to preventing further regional drug smuggling and terrorist threats.

15. (C) Comment: While the RSLAF face considerable challenges with regards to professionalization, particularly due to financial constraints, it has the potential to become a leader in the sub-region with regards to versatility and operational excellence. The current political regime is strongly in favor of the USG and of putting action behind their words of support for protecting human rights and guaranteeing peace, both in Sierra Leone and abroad. Without encouragement from the USG and other donors, the government

FREETOWN 00000519 002 OF 002

will be unable to support its rhetoric with appreciable outputs. Sierra Leone is arguably the most stable country in the Mano River Union, but is still vulnerable to economic and social pressures. Allowing Sierra Leone to slip back into instability and conflict would run counter to USG interests. Supporting the RSLAF now will be a significant investment in future regional security. End Comment.

PERRY